



Lawson Ichiro Sakai



Lawson (right) greets an old friend

“We all knew, we are going to go battle. And we expect to win. But we never knew what immediate death was like until we hit the front line on the first day.”

At a mere 21 years old in 1944, Lawson Sakai had seen and learned more about the stark realities of humanity, war, and loss than so many other people his age. After trying to enlist in the U.S. Navy in the wake of Pearl Harbor, he was denied the opportunity to serve his country due to the irrational, anti-Japanese fervor sweeping the West Coast. The Sakai family was lucky, however, in that they were welcomed and sponsored by the Seventh-day Adventist church in Delta, Colorado, avoiding the humiliations of incarceration. But when word got out that a segregated unit comprised entirely of young Nisei (second generation Japanese Americans) was being formed in 1943, Lawson's desire to serve outweighed the sting of forced removal and anti-Japanese sentiment. "I'm just a young kid, not in politics, all I know is this is my country," he says.

And serve he did. As part of the 442nd Regimental Combat Team, Lawson experienced some of the most significant battles in Europe — and in all of military history — that brought the Nisei soldiers their deserved recognition and attention to their extraordinary synergy on the battlefield. But the price they paid was colossal and still leaves Lawson, now 96, with bouts of PTSD. "I drank a lot, but I think I was able to control it. It was the only cure that we had for PTSD. I still have it. And it will never go away." To say he is owed our utmost gratitude feels like an understatement. To thank him for his service also falls short. But perhaps it is enough to call him precisely what he is — an American hero.

My name is Lawson Ichiro Sakai. I was born October 27, 1923 in a little place called Montebello in Southern California. It's just seven miles from downtown Los Angeles.

Can you tell me what a typical day was like for you growing up in Los Angeles before the war?

Well, I'm a young Nisei. My parents were working, pretty much full time. So, I was just going to school and coming home, doing homework. And as I grew older, I began playing sports at high school. And I had a lot of other friends, so I was hanging out with classmates a lot. Had very little worries. Just kept growing up.

And what was the community like? Were there a lot of other Japanese Americans?

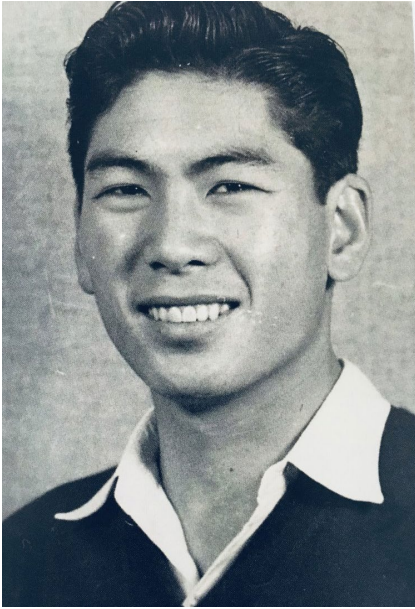
In our city of Montebello, I think I can count seven, maybe eight Japanese families. But we were kind of scattered. We were kind of in the western part of town and we had five acres of land, greenhouse. The other people were farming farther south, farther north. So the only time I would see these people would be at school. We didn't have much of a community of Japanese. Most of our Japanese friends were in Los Angeles, and that's because my parents were Seventh-day Adventists. And the church was in Boyle Heights. And it just so happened there was a German missionary that had been to Japan, spoke fluent Japanese. So, the Japanese Seventh-day Adventists people would go to that Seventh-Day Adventist church in the basement and he would preach to them in Japanese. So all these Issei, maybe there were 15-20 Issei. And this German man is speaking to them in Japanese. They had little Christian assemblies. So most of our friends were there. At least on my parents' side.

And your parents were farming?

Well, we called it farming. The five acres there were a greenhouse. We grew Asparagus Plumosus Ferns. It's a little green leaf that they put in bouquets and things. We also farmed about 13 miles away in a real remote farming area called Blue Hills. And it's currently La Mirada Country Club. There were dirt roads. About seven Japanese farmers were farming out there. And

there we grew mostly produce. My father planted about three or four acres of fig trees, so we had a fig orchard. We had seven to eight acres of flowering peaches which was in the spring, pinkish, white and red blossoms that he would cut and take to the flower market. And we grew other produce like beans. I can't remember all the kind of produce we grew, but typical farming.

Right. So you were comfortable growing up?



This was during the Depression. Late '20s, early '30s. And nobody had money but the farmers had produce. We could eat pretty much what we grew and when they would go to the market and they would trade with each other and bring home things that we didn't grow and so forth. So we always had a lot of vegetables to eat. And with rice and vegetables, and very little meat in those days. So Japanese food, you can pretty much [have] tofu, and that's basically what we ate through the Depression years.

Can you tell me about the day Pearl Harbor happened? What do you remember about that day?

I can remember a lot because I was 18. I had graduated Montebello High School in 1941. So in September, I drove down to Compton Junior College and decided that's where I was going to go. Well, Sunday morning, December 7th, I was doing my homework at home. I had the radio on and not paying much attention to anything and all of a sudden, when the announcer broke in and said Pearl Harbor has been bombed, it was kind of a stunning event.

I knew then what my parents had been talking about, among themselves basically, not to us, that there was a lot of tension between Japan and the United States because Japan had been forcing the invasion of China, Manchuria, Southeast Asia. And there had been many negotiations that did

not work out. The United States had put an embargo on the oil that Japan had to get from Southeast Asia to supply their military. So when that embargo went in, they kind of put the choking effect on the Japanese military. My parents subscribed to the Rafu Shimpo, the Japanese newspaper, and we had a shortwave radio. A regular radio, with the shortwave tuning. And I think it was like two or three in the morning, they would try to tune in and catch something from Japan. And like most Japanese families, they would try to get some word from Japan.

Well, between the newspaper and the radio, all this friction was coming out and sure enough, when the Japanese bombed Pearl Harbor, it was war. And I didn't know it then, but later as we discussed with Hawai'i boys, the United States government had been asked by Great Britain, to join the European war because Hitler had now conquered France. He was bombing Great Britain and next step was to invade Great Britain, and next step was to invade the United States. And the German Bund was very active on the East Coast of the United States, sending messages to the German submarines about the American ships going to Europe. I don't know how many American ships were sunk off the eastern coast. So, Great Britain knew that the end was near if they didn't get help.

Well, United States Congress in 1939 and '40, didn't want to go to war because most of these Congressmen had been in World War I some twenty years before. Now their kids are 20, 21, 22, perfect age to go to war. They didn't want to send their kids to war. So every time Roosevelt would say, "Let's go help Britain." "No." So when Japan bombed Pearl Harbor, FDR knew that if he declared war on Japan, he could also declare war on Germany. Exactly what happened. So immediately after Pearl Harbor, U.S. is engaging in war on two fronts. Even though the main enemy is Japan, most of the effort went to Europe.

And, in my case, I'm just a young kid, not in politics, all I know is this is my country. The following day, instead of going to school my classmates, three of them said, "Why don't we go join the Navy?" *[laughs]* So we go to Long Beach. And Ed Hardage, Roy Kepner, Jimmy Keys, my Caucasian classmates,

all accepted. And Sakai? “Wait a minute, you’re Japanese.” “I’m an American.” “You’re Japanese.” “You can’t go in the Navy.” Alright. I told my classmates, “They won’t let me join.” They said, “Well, the hell with the Navy! If you can’t go we’re not going either.” So we all left and went back to school. After that, I went back to Compton Junior College. Nothing happened. My classmates were great, they knew I was Japanese — they didn’t pick on me. They didn’t say anything about Pearl Harbor. I was playing football. The coach kind of picked on me a little bit. Coach Sagat he said, “You know, if Japan invades California, will you attack me?” [laughs] My football coach!



Terminal Island Japanese Fishing Village Memorial

But anyway, Compton is near Long Beach and San Pedro and Terminal Island, and there were a lot of Japanese kids that were going to school from that area. All of a sudden, they weren’t there. And I didn’t know why. I didn’t know what had happened. I think it was a couple of weeks later

before I found out. They had been forced to leave their homes on Terminal Island; the people in San Pedro were told they had to get ready to leave. Where they went I don't know. I didn't find out until much later that Terminal Island people had 48 hours to just pick up and leave. All of this was not publicized. Now we didn't know. All we knew is what they told us. And the government told us very little.

Well, December 7th, I have to go back to this. My uncle and my aunt had come to the United States in 1895. They worked hard. They bought that five acre piece of property in Montebello under their name: Masajiro and Yarakai. Immigrants from Japan. But they bought it before the Alien Land Law was passed. So the government couldn't take it away from them. And my aunt had divorced her husband, and so she retained the right to the property. She had papers, I guess.

So, going forward now. When we moved to Colorado, they were gone about three and a half years. I was still overseas in July of 1945 when they came back to California. My aunt, my parents entrusted the house and the glasshouse to this person in 1942. "We will be back in a month or two. Just keep track of it for us." Well, after three and a half years, when they show up [the trustees] said, "Get out of here, it's my property!" It took a little while, maybe a month or so, but they finally got him evicted. And they could move back in their own property.

They were lucky, then.

But even though they were aliens, they were able to hang on to that property. Another story, my wife's side. In 1940, their father was getting wealthy. Biggest farmer in Gilroy. Well, he being an immigrant from Japan was unable to own the land but he had a benefactor who owned the place he was farming



and wanted to give it to him. So
basically he just handed it to him

Mineko's family at their home in Gilroy, pre war.

but legally changed the title to my
father-in-law. For pennies probably. You know, very little money. This is
about 1927 or '28.

This man told my father, "You can't own the land, but your children can."
At that point he had four children. She's the second. So the four older,
maybe they were fourteen, thirteen, twelve. You know, young teenagers. So
they went to San Francisco and formed a trusteeship and there was a
businessman in town that owned the International Harvester Tractor
franchise. He was the trustee for the four little kids. So the kids, American
citizens, owned the land which was actually owned by the father. That was
close to a thousand acres. He owned it, they couldn't take it away from him
during the war. So very few Japanese families had that availability. Most of
them leased the land and they lost it.

Can you describe what happened when your parents found the Colorado church and were able to avoid camp?

When the evacuation order came out, Governor Ralph Carr in Colorado
made a statement saying, "If Governor Warren doesn't want you in
California, you are welcome to come to my state of Colorado." And many
Japanese did. But only those who could afford to go or who weren't afraid.
Here, most of them had never left their area of California. And to go to
Colorado, you know, it was very difficult. Well in my parents case, being
Seventh-day Adventists, the church contacted a Seventh-day Adventist
church in Delta, Colorado and asked them to sponsor a Japanese family.
And they said sure. And somehow my family got picked.

So we go down on Highway 99 and some place down south by Bakersfield,
my parents decide since we're from L.A., all those people had been sent to
Manzanar. So they said let's go to Manzanar, visit our friends. We had a car
and a small bobtail truck. My father drove the car and I drove the truck. We
got to the gate at Manzanar and of course, the soldiers were on guard. And I
had this pass. So when I showed the soldier the pass and told him what I

wanted to do, he just opened the gate and we drove in. And at the headquarters we told them, “We’re here to visit all these families. Can you get in touch with them, tell them we are here?” And they looked at us and said, “See out there? See the machine guns, the rifles, the soldiers, barbed wire fence? You’re in prison. They are not gonna let you leave prison.” So my parents said uh oh [*laughs*]. Maybe we’d better see if we can leave. We won’t wait. So we didn’t wait, got back to our car and went to the gate and I had this pass and pulled up there. And the same soldier that let us in is still standing there with the rifle. And I said, “We are done!” Opened the gate, and we left! So, I call it the Great Escape. Because we really got – I am sure – we were the only Japanese family in 1942 to go in a prison camp and out.

Were you shocked at seeing how it was set up with the barbed wire and the guard towers?

Not really because you know, I’m not paying much attention to detail. All of this did not sink in until 50 years later. We didn’t know that there were ten camps being built all over. We didn’t know that. Even though, like her [Lawson’s wife] father had been taken away, we didn’t know that the Department of Justice had all these other camps all over. But going back to December 7th, by four o’clock, the FBI came to our home looking for my uncle. They didn’t know that my aunt and uncle were divorced. So of course he wasn’t living with us. And they said, “Do you know where he is?” I said, “I do.” So they said, “Will you take us there?” I said, “Sure.” So, I got into the car with the FBI and he was about thirteen miles away at the other ranch. So I took them to the ranch and when we got there, they pushed me down so nobody could see me and then they went in and got my uncle and took him out. And then they brought me home again.

Wow.

That was December 7th. Now that happened all over California. That’s how well-organized the FBI was. Now they’re saying the FBI had access to all the census records and that’s how they knew where all the Japanese were. Because they were knocking at their doors that day!

Was your uncle a minister or a language teacher?

He was a businessman. He was, what would you call it, flamboyant? In 1940 he was driving a Chrysler Airflow, which would be like a Mercedes Benz today. *The* car of the country. He was the head of United Farmers Association, 9th Street Produce in L.A. The Japanese owned the produce market. My father belonged to the 7th Street Flower Market. The Japanese owned the flower market. The Japanese were getting wealthy in 1940 and '41. If the Japanese were allowed to purchase the land, they would have owned all of Monterey and Carmel because they were farming all that property.

It was this lost fortune.

You know, they talk about the millions or billions that the Japanese lost in property. It could have been tremendous because if they were allowed to buy and not just lease; they could have owned most of the land in California.

I think you are alluding to this idea already, but do you believe that Pearl Harbor was a good excuse because California farmers, the white farmers, were bitter against the Japanese success?

There was a lot of jealousy. They see a Japanese man driving a Chrysler Imperial and they're driving a beat-up old Model A or something.

Right. Do you feel it was a land grab?

I think people like General DeWitt, he was so — I guess so blinded by his racism that he had the authority, militarily, on the West Coast. And all of the government was being run by people on the East Coast. Basically the WASP, white, Anglo-Saxon Protestants. Roosevelt and all of his staff, very few of them had ever seen an Asian person, very few had any contact with someone of Japanese ancestry. All they knew was that there were two Japanese foreign ministers in Washington at the time of Pearl Harbor. And what they knew was going on in China and East Asia. So when DeWitt said, "A Jap is a Jap, and will never assimilate in the Western culture. You have

got to get rid of them.” “Yeah, this man must know what he’s talking about.”

It’s scary. Now, if we’re going forward to when you were living in Colorado with your parents, can you talk about what happened when you were finally able to enlist into the army? How did you find out they made a segregated unit?

We were in Colorado I think by May of 1942. And it was in Delta, Colorado, which is a small town forty miles south of Grand Junction which is the main town of Western Colorado. And there was a Japanese farmer named Miyake and he had two or three sons. Actually one was in the army, and the older son had a photography shop in town, and the younger son was helping on the farm. And I got to be friends with the younger son and even lived out there for a few weeks, helping harvest and so forth.

During that time, I decided to go back to school, so the next year of school [I went to] Mesa College in Grand Junction. So I moved from Delta to Grand Junction and got a job as a houseboy to pay my room and board and enrolled at Mesa College. And again I was playing football and having fun. You know, kids are kids. And there was no discrimination. I got along fine with everybody there. But somehow I got word that the 442nd was being formed. And Mineko’s [Lawson’s wife] older brother was there. So we decided we’re going to join as soon as we can. So when the word came out in either February or March of 1943 that you could volunteer, we went to Denver from Grand Junction. We just hopped on the train, no tickets or anything! We got to Denver, went to the draft board, and signed up. His last name is Hirasaki, mine is Sakai. He got called in April. I didn’t get called ‘til May because it’s not just us, it’s any eligible young man.

So in the mainland, it was very slow to get boys into the 442 because they had to come from all over. Most of them from these prison camps. In Hawaii 10,000 boys volunteered immediately. And the idea was they would take 2,500 from the



mainland, 1,500 from Hawaii, and form the 442. Well, they got all these boys in Hawaii willing to go. In the mainland, when the recruiters came to the camps, the boys would say, “Well, let us out of prison, let our parents out, give us our citizenship back.” “Oh, we can’t do that, but we want you in the army.” They said, “Well, screw you. We are not going in the army. Unless you let us out.”

So they had to reverse the numbers. Now it’s getting 1,500 from the mainland and 2,500 from Hawai’i. They shipped immediately a whole bunch from Hawai’i. So from the mainland, there’s 2,500 boys from Hawaii there in Camp Shelby, the mainlanders coming in one, two at a time from Arkansas, Poston, you know, from different camps. It was a long time forming.

You can understand why no one would want to volunteer. What did your parents think about you volunteering? Were they supportive?

I think my parents were different than a lot of the parents because number one, they were Seventh-day Adventists; number two, they wanted to be American. They had no intention of going back to live in Japan. And number three, their kids, like me, were American. And they expect us, if we’re going to join the army, we’re joining the American army. There were no questions. Now a lot of Japanese families in camp are very bitter and you can’t blame them. They lost everything. So when the boy says, “Dad, I think I’ll join the 442nd.” “Oh no you are not! You are not going to join the United States Army unless they let us out of prison.” That was basically what most of the Issei told them. Quite a few of the Nisei boys had parents that said, “This is your country. You do what you think you should do.” So

you had to mix the very bitter Issei parents with the more Americanized Issei parents, and it was a very tough decision. That's why a lot of the Nisei boys couldn't immediately join. It took a long time, a lot of discussion and in many cases they had to leave these camps at night because normally you'd get a little ceremony or goodbye, but these pro-Japan guys would beat them up. You know, 20 or 30 of these guys coming and beating up on these kids who are volunteering. Happened a lot in camps. There were a lot of horror stories about that. We didn't know about it but you hear about this later on. People start talking about what happened.

Now, I didn't have to answer question 27 and 28 in camp, the loyalty questionnaire. I can understand why people would say yes/no, no/yes, no/no or yes. You know, the influence of the pro-Japan people was very strong in camp and I think they had a legitimate gripe. The country took everything away from them and put them in prison. I didn't have that experience. But for those who did, it was a very difficult decision to join the 442. I don't have any problem with people that said no/no. It's just the people that were so pro-Japan, they held these rallies. "We're gonna win the war! We're gonna beat the United States!" They were marching with Japanese songs and, you know, those are the kind of people – and a lot of them were shipped to Japan. And almost all of them came back. And almost all of them got their citizenship back.

It's a hard decision.

But a lot of them won't admit to that. You know, they tell their kids, "We protested. We protested being put in prison." But they don't mention this pro-Japan part. And it's a pretty touchy subject. Pretty hard to go to somebody and say, "Did your parents or grandparents ever tell you how badly you were pro-Japan?" You can't bring up subjects like that. Of course, the Issei are all gone now. The Nisei are almost all gone. So historically the bad part is disappearing.

It's disappearing and another generation is seeing the conflict. It's complicated on both sides.

You know, the Japanese population is pretty much non-existent in this country anymore. As they become intermarrying with other nationalities the names change, the faces change. You just you can't tell who's who anymore. So the old Issei, Nisei custom is no longer in the Japanese culture.

What are some vivid memories you have of basic training, being at Camp Shelby, and getting to know your fellow soldiers?

Camp Shelby is very interesting. I was assigned to E Company, infantry. Pretty much a foreign type of thing because most of us had been pretty sheltered at home. The boys in Hawaii lived very close together, and participated in sports and school and so forth. In the mainland we weren't that close but we were living kind of a normal life like any other teenage kids. When you get into the army, all of a sudden you are under orders. And everybody was superior. You're a Private, Private First Class, Corporal, Sergeant, you know, on up. Everybody's above you and you have to obey whoever tells you what to do.

So it was kind of difficult for the boys from Hawai'i to accept that because they were used to being – you might say the majority group in Hawaii – the Japanese Nisei boys could get away with almost anything. The Caucasian boys, not so much. In the mainland, it was just the opposite. The biggest difficulty between the mainland boys and Hawaii boys? There was a real clash of culture. The Hawaiian boys had their own language, pidgin English. And fortunately I understood pidgin, I knew a little bit. My older sister had dated a boy from Hawaii who was going to medical school. Some of the mainland boys didn't pick it up and they had a hard time. And there was another difference: Hawaiian boys are pretty happy-go-lucky and they had money. And most of the mainland boys didn't have any money. We had our payroll or whatever it was, 21 dollars. You would get your pay one day, one month, in cash. You would pay your laundry bill, maybe had 10 or 15 dollars left and you'd blow it right away. So you were broke for the rest of the month. Well, the Hawaiian boys would get these letters coming from home, and they would just tear of the end, shake it and blue cards would come out: Money orders from Hawaii. Because everybody is working in Hawaii and making money. And the custom is to send money to your brother or sisters

or friends, whoever. And they would have a lot of blue cards, cash.

Well, you're in training and on weekends, a lot of the boys are allowed to go to the nearest town which is Hattiesburg, Mississippi. And there's a bus that would come through the camp and you could hop on the bus and it would take you right there. All the Hawaiian boys are, you know, "Let's go to the town and..."[mumbles] "Oh, we don't want to go." "Why not? Come on!" "Oh no. Don't have any money." "Oh don't worry, we got money! Don't worry!" And they'd drag us with them [*laughs*]. Well when you get into Hattiesburg, you're heading for the nice restaurant because you're going to eat fried chicken. And as soon as you hit the restaurant, the waitress is waving at the boys, they're clearing the tables, making people leave. They want the Hawaiian boys to come and sit down. And invariably the five, six, seven boys would get seated right away. We'd get our meal, maybe they'd pay 25 bucks or so, but they'd leave a 100 dollar tip. These waitresses are waiting for the 442 boys to come into town! [*laughs*] Oh boy, the 442 boys were laughing it up! And you know, they don't care. Next week, next letter, more money. They never had to worry about it. It was a completely different atmosphere. And the mainland boys — their parents, their siblings are in prison, they can't do anything. It was a pretty tough time.

Eventually after almost a year, there were so many fights between mainland boys and Hawaiian boys, over nothing. They just said, "Oh you hard-head!" *POW!* They wouldn't, they never asked any— *POW*. Just like that. If you didn't duck fast you got it. But it was so bad that Colonel Pence, our commander called all the officers together and they wanted to know what the heck is going on? He says, "How can we send this bunch of guys to war, when they can't even get along with each other? They're fighting." And somebody came up with the bright idea that maybe the Hawai'i boys would change their way of thinking if they were sent to the two camps in Arkansas, Rohwer and Jerome.

So they arranged for, and of course they had told the inmates of these camps, "Next month we are gonna bring a busload of 442

boys. Maybe you can entertain them, have a dance, have dinner.” So I think there were two busloads that went to each camp and all Hawaiian boys, no mainland boys.

All the boys were with the ukuleles, you know, they’re all going for a good time.

And when they get there they’re very shocked because there’s a U.S. army soldier wearing the same uniform. Then, “We have to pat you down. We have to find out if you are carrying any weapons.” And they were saying what the hell is going on? And of course they found out that these people had to save up food for a month to provide enough for them to have a party and so forth. And Dan Inouye — we were in the same company — Dan told me later he said, “You know, as we were going there, we were just really having a good time on the bus, can’t wait to get there. But when we left, it was like a funeral,” he said. Everybody was sad. How could you volunteer from these prisons? Dan was saying, “You know, if I had been in that prison, I don’t think I would have volunteered.” And he was one of the leaders of the VVV in Hawai’i. So all these guys that came back from camp spread the word, and I don’t think there was a fight after.

They understood where you were coming from.

Yeah.

So the camaraderie got closer.

You know, it was kind of close anyway. But now it was like, *really* close.

I didn’t know that they were brought into Rower and Jerome to see the camp. But I can see how that shifted everything.

Yeah. You know, the boys of Hawai’i were just so happy-go-lucky. They knew that they were going to go to war. But every day was like, “Yeah, do



Senator Daniel Inouye (center) and Lawson Sakai (right).

whatever you feel like. It might be your last day.” And if you got money, spend it! If the mainland boys had money, they sent it back to their parents.

Right before you were about to be shipped off to Europe, what was your state of mind? Were you afraid or were you feeling like, no matter what happens this is a good cause? Can you describe your state of mind before you took off?

Shipping over or going into battle?

Shipping over. Right before you went to Europe.

You know, you’re teenagers. And you know why you volunteered: You’re going to war. I don’t think any one of us thought we’d come home alive. Nobody thought we’d come home alive. It wasn’t a suicide mission, but I think the Japanese culture was different than most Caucasian. And you heard of a lot of it from the Hawaii boys especially because they were very Buddhist trained. And many of them had been in Japan, going to school and their habits were very Japanese. And I guess there is that term. *Yamato-damashii*. Is that it?

Oh yeah.

You know, I guess it harkens back to samurai days, where you had that spirit. Nothing’s going to stop you. And even if you die, you know —

It was honorable.

Yeah. They had that feeling. And we all knew we are going to go battle. And we expect to win. But we never knew what immediate death was like until we hit the frontline on the first day. I can’t remember what day. It was July 5 or 6, on the first day of battle, when we joined the 100th in Northern Italy. And E Company is one of the lead companies, we should have been up here [Lawson raises his hand] but the company commander led us down at the bottom. And there was nothing going on and we were just kind of moving along and all of a sudden, the fire. The Germans just lit into us with everything they had. Artillery, mortar, machine guns and people were

getting hit left and right. And our captain was shot and killed the very first day. My platoon leader, Lieutenant Zukowski, was killed the first day. We lost a lot of men that very first day. After about three hours, the battalion commander Colonel Hanley, called the 100th who were in reserve to replace us. And they came in and they went up on the top. And the Germans didn't know that we had been replaced. They started coming down the trough and the 100th just slaughtered the Germans. But, you know, that was our first day. Oh my god. And when you see bodies flying around and blood all over, you know, bodies that are dead. It's a real shock. But that's just the beginning. That's the way it was from then. Every day.



"442 E Company" hangs on the gate to Lawson's backyard.

Every day. So hard.

So many boys got killed. The lucky ones were just wounded badly but survived.

And how old were you on the first day when you were deployed?

I was 20. This is summertime of 1944. We shipped overseas May 1st of 1944, took thirty days to get across the Atlantic and the 100th of course from September 1943 had fought up the coast of Italy. So they were past Rome, and then that's when we met with them in Civitavecchia, which is north of

Rome, and became one regiment. 100th was our first battalion, second and third. But from then on, we're fighting to northern Italy and in August we were supposed to — we were with the 34th division. Then we were supposed to join the 36th division and move from Italy to France and invade southern France. Well, Normandy had started in June of 1944. So, since the 36th division couldn't get going early enough, the Germans sent most of their troops from the south of France up to Normandy to bolster those people up there. So when we landed in southern France by LST [Landing Ship, Tank], there's the boats at the front end and drops down and you jump into them, with very little resistance. It didn't take long to get on the shore and wipe

out whatever Germans were there. So they trucked us from southern France to eastern France. And this is October, we're up there in eastern France. And October 15 is when we started for Bruyères.

Can you now tell the story of the liberation of Bruyères? That was one of the major campaigns you were a part of.

The liberation of Bruyères – this is a small village, I don't know, maybe 1,000 people. But it's the largest city in that particular area. There are quite a few rolling hills and forestry was probably the biggest industry, you might say, of that Alsace-Lorraine area. We're only about 15 miles from the German border. Strasbourg is on the German border. And these hills are forested and they have a number of logging firms that cut down these trees and ship the logs up. Well on October 15, we were given the order to take the city of Bruyères and the rail line that runs through the valley that was supplying the German troops on the Western Front. So the Germans wanted to protect that property. And as the 442 was heading toward Bruyères in the flat area, all of a sudden the German fire started coming. But not from the city, but coming from the hills. And in Italy we seldom had trees. And here, a forest of trees! And the shells were coming from there. So we had to start climbing into the forest. Well 15th of October we start out and it was probably around the 20th before we actually got down into the village of Bruyères. We had to go through the mountain, clear the mountain, and there were hills: A, B, C and D. And different battalions were assigned to different hills to chase the Germans out before we could come down. And then we had to chase the Germans out of town from building to building. Even in the church.

Oh wow.

If you look at the buildings you'll see a lot of patched up parts where the artillery hit the buildings and bullet holes here and there. So it took until the 23rd of October, eight days, to clear the Germans, capture the railroad track, and then



we finally were off the line. And that's when we got a hot meal, got to change our clothes. You know, no change of clothes all that time. And we were off the line October 23 and 24 and then they told us we have to start again. And the reason is, there's been an American battalion that had been surrounded by Germans. Now, we're a regiment. A regiment is only one third of a division. And the division has two more regiments someplace. Now General Dahlquist is the commanding general of the 36th division. He's the one that forced his men out there, so far that they were surrounded by the Germans. Supposedly, he sent his second battalion of the 141st and the third battalion of the 141st after the first battalion. They couldn't penetrate the Germans and they were shot down. So that's when he called for the 442nd to get to the Lost Battalion. Well, the weather was bad, this is October. It was raining, cold and we had to climb that mountain again; all those trees and of course the Germans were shooting into the trees. It's just really miserable. And I would guess that the 442nd was probably at no more than 50 percent manpower.

Before or after that?

This is at that point.

At that point.

Because after the battle for Bruyères we were like, decimated. Maybe half of our men were gone. Either killed or injured or, you know, taken back. So, we were short-handed anyway to start out with. And of course our casualties are mounting every day. They say it took five days. October 30 is when the 3rd battalion reached the men that had been trapped. Now October 28, I

was wounded by artillery so badly that I thought I was dead. And I just curled up, artillery was in my back, a big hot piece of metal, just so hot and the pain is so great you just blackout. And, I know when the medic got to me I just told him to let me die right there. I am sure he shot me full of morphine. Because all I remember is that when I woke up, I was on a train. They had a hospital train going to the American hospital in Dijon for surgery. I don't know how long I was there. But I wasn't there when they rescued them. When the rescue happened, the general was up there and he said, "Keep going! I want the 442 to keep chasing the Germans!" So they didn't get to meet or help or talk to the 211 men they rescued. And at that, I don't think we even — the 442 didn't have 200 men left.

You were mentioning that there was another time that you thought you should've been gone. Can you describe what happened?

When we first started attacking Bruyères, we were in pretty close quarters in the hill. And they had two types of grenades: One is called anti-personnel, it's smaller and little fragments, it just bursts all over. Usually pretty deadly. And the other is a concussion grenade. And the Germans had what they called the "potato masher." It had a handle and a little round top that had an explosive. But the shell was a very thin metal. And so the concussion grenade is what blew up in my face. And I was blinded and of course the blood was all over — just face cuts really bleed. And I couldn't see, I think I was knocked out, but when I got to the aid station which is right behind the front line, they cleaned me up as best they could. And they could see that I wasn't seriously injured but, you know. So that day I was out of action, but I went back the next day. After we got through Bruyères, we're starting up again on the 25th of October. Now I'm 20 years old. But I'm 21 on the 27th. So 25th, 26th, 27th we're in the middle of the hill. We're attacking, the machine guns, and all of a sudden a German popped up and shot me. And he was no more than maybe ten feet away from me. I heard the bang and the flash. I thought I was dead. But I wasn't. So I had a BAR [Browning Automatic Rifle] and I just turned and I just *tut-tut-tut-tut*. And, you know, took care of him. And I went up and I grabbed him. His helmet came off and he was just a little boy. Maybe a 14, 15 year old boy. The

Germans had conscripted young people and old people because they're running out of bodies. How he missed me, I don't know. But he could have hit me, you know, that close. So I should have been dead on my 21st birthday. But I survived [*laughs*]. But the next day I got it anyway. Oh boy.

That was the bad injury.

But you know, everybody was getting shot. I don't know how we survived at all. It was just, you know. And the weather! Raining, muddy, just miserable. That's why we stopped going back there in October [for the reunion in Bruyères].

And when did you finally leave Europe? Were you there until '45?

After the rescue of the Lost Battalion, we were sent to the south of France. And the 442 was there from the middle of November to early April. So during that time, I was in the hospital for almost three months. So I came back around January. And we were sent back to Italy, secretly, to attack the so-called Gothic Line. These six mountains were, you might say, covering the pass to the Po Valley which would then lead into Germany. So, the Germans had been on top shooting down. And the 442 secretly came back to that area. We would hide out in the daytime and then either truck forward or march at night.

And finally we went into a village called Azzano and Monte Folgorito was the main mountain of these six mountains. And there's a valley. And Azzano is kind of a small village in the hillside. The 442 went in there. And we observed the 92nd division, U.S. division trying to attack up this 4,000 feet mountain. Everyday getting shot down. And I think Colonel Miller, he was told by General Mark Clark that he had two weeks to figure out how to attack the Germans because the American troops had been there almost six months. And they needed to get up through to get into the Po Valley, so they could get into Germany. Well, the word came down to strip off all your equipment except your ammo belt on which hangs your canteen. The water canteen. You have to have water. Make sure it's covered so there is no reflection and no noise. Cap is secure. Leave your backpack, we put our

raincoat and food and stuff in. Take that off. Just ammunition, your weapon, and your water and climb that mountain. At night. Dark of night.

Well, there were Italian *partisanos*. Now the Germans had been there three, four years. They'd shot and killed men, women, whoever at random. Huge atrocities. So the only people who were left were young boys or old men. So, somehow they got word that this 14-year-old boy could hike the hills and knew the gold trail up Monte Folgorito. Bare mountain. And all these mountains had crossfire. So they could see each other crossfire if there was any action going on. Well, nobody had gone up at night. So here our orders are to go up. I'm in the 2nd battalion. 3rd battalion was ordered to go up first. And you know, if you go there, and I've been there a couple of times, looking at that mountain from Azzano, no way, you can't climb that. Even in daytime you can't climb that thing [*laughs*]. I don't know how we did it. You push from behind, you pull from above. And you had to be very quiet. Because you don't want the Germans to know you're up there.

I think there were two or three boys that fell, but didn't make any noise. Shig Kizuka from Watsonville was in L Company, he was the third soldier at the lead. So he told me when they climbed up, they were huffing and puffing quietly, when they got up there was this ledge where the machine guns were mounted. And when they saw that, they stopped right underneath. And waited for the other boys to catch up and waited for daybreak. Now I think we're going at about 8 o'clock at night, it probably took six, seven our hours to get up there. And, you know, there's hundreds of men going up there. Just quietly. And Shig said they counted down when the sun broke, got light [*whispers*] one, two, go! You know, hand signals. So they charged up, over the top where the machine guns were. There were two German soldiers sound asleep. He said they just riddled them, went on top, and as the boys go, they just started shooting all over. The German camp was on the flat area and they caught them by surprise. The Germans were shooting back, trying to get their trucks started and just got as much as they could and took off. Going toward Massa in Carrara. But you know, we're all on foot and we can't chase them very far. They're mechanized. So they take off, we go over this way. The 100th's on the other side. They could

see and hear the firing and they went up over there. Finally, we're on the flat and we are able to go toward Massa and Carrara. See that white marble?



Monte Folgorito monument replica

That's a replica of a monument that's about 25 feet tall, it's on a hillside just between Monte Folgorito and Massa. And the cut-out is symbolic of — it's mounted on the hillside in this little village — and when you stand here and look through the cut-out, that is the hillside that the Italian *partisanos* slaughtered the Germans that were trying to escape. Now the Germans had confiscated every weapon they could find. So the *partisanos* asked Colonel Miller, our commanding officer, if they can have some arms to help chase the Germans. So I don't know how many, but he armed a bunch of these Italian *partisanos*. They were happy to chase the Germans! And when the were Germans going up, escaping up this hillside, they just slaughtered

them. And that's where that monument stands. And I don't know the name of that village, but if you go there, it's white marble. It's about 25 foot tall. The very same thing.

That's incredible. Yeah.

I met with some of those *partisanos* on one of those trips over there and that's when they gave that to me and of course they took us to that hill and we had a big party. And you know, they were so happy to be able to kill all those Germans. And if you ever go to Massa, they have a war museum. One that's full of atrocities. German atrocities. Shooting point blank, pulling somebody out of the house and shooting them. All that kind of stuff is documented. Really, really bad. So that's how the 442 was able to chase the Germans up to the coast where Massa and Carrara cities are. And by that time, they opened up the road going to the coast. So we could chase the Germans all the way up to Genoa, which is up the coast. And the Germans went into the Po Valley. And when they got to Brescia, there is a Ghedi airport and they surrendered. That was like May 7 or 8. I can't remember. That was the end of the war.

That was it.

I remember, Captain Aikens captain of E Company, I don't know how many people we had left but he had a bottle of whiskey and he just started drinking and he drank it all and passed out [*laughs*].

Well deserved.

I remember that. But you know, the Germans were tired of the war. They just surrendered. There were maybe 3,000 German troops. Maybe there were 300 of us. They could have slaughtered us. But they just surrendered. They voluntarily took care of their own camp, they brought all their weapons, they piled them up in order. Small arms, larger arms, all kinds of stuff. They had more, well they even had a printing machine. A truck that printed Italian lira. You know, artificial, phony money. But you know, it was the end of the war.

You were a part of these major battles that were significant. And I think a lot of people today see those battles as suicide missions that the 442 was sent into. Do you ever look back and just wonder how you survived this?

You wonder how you survived. One of my good friends from Hawai'i, from Hilo, his name was Sunei Sakamoto. He was the platoon sergeant for the 3rd platoon of E Company. He was vicious. A real nice guy. But, in battle he was loud, standing up there, hollering everybody to charge and he'd get everybody in 3rd platoon charging. He finally was injured pretty badly. But I don't know how he survived either. You know, he was a leader. I never saw anybody going to battle like he did. Just amazing. But that's what it took. And that's what the 442nd did. I think that probably no other American infantry unit did. The Germans said, "We don't want to fight those guys. They fight like maniacs."

And then do you think that was because of what you said, it was camaraderie but also being culturally Japanese?

I think the culture, yeah. You know the background. Two things: You're Japanese, you became the enemy, now you have to prove you are not the enemy, and of course your background is, "We're gonna fight till the death." You know, we are not just doing lip service, we're out there to win the war. No matter what. And if we die, we die. That was it. That's how the 442 fought.

Amazing. How was the reunion with your parents, after you came back?

Well I'd been gone for a long time. You know, my parents never asked me what happened, I don't think they knew or maybe that was the Issei culture, you don't ask.

They never knew about any part of the service?

No they never, you know, we never corresponded during the war. I wrote to my sister a few times. I wrote to my girlfriend a few times. But you know, I

wasn't much into correspondence because, number one, you're hardly ever at a place where you have paper or a pen. And the number two, you have to carry everything. Your personal belongings. So if you needed a pen, you had to carry it in your pack or something. So we didn't want to carry anything we didn't need.

You were a little too busy for that!

Yeah, really! *[laughs]*

So, were your parents relieved to see you? Do you think that was a–

You know, in our Issei, Nisei culture that was like: "I'm home!" "Oh." You know. And they speak Japanese and I don't speak Japanese. *[laughs]*

Yeah.

No hugging. No kissing. No grabbing hands. It's just bowing. And that's it.

Now, Mineko later became your wife. Did being in the war make you marry her? What was the story behind it?

Well, I think I was shell-shocked. That's probably why I wanted to get married *[laughs]*.

Shell-shocked, yeah.

But you know, the war is over they were trying to send me to Rome for further training and I told Captain Burns, our company commander, "I am not going any place in the army. I just want to get out. I just want to – the War is over, I am still alive – I just want to go home. Get me out of here somehow." And it took May 'til November, so it took six months to get me out. There was a point system. And the boys from Hawaii had five points for going from Hawaii to the mainland. Because that was overseas for them. So they got five points more than me. So, most of the Hawaii boys got to go home before me.

Wow.

So I had to kill time there in northern Italy until they called us. So I came home in late November 1945. But the 442nd itself didn't come home until July of the following year. So all these young boys are now being drafted and trained in Camp Shelby. They're being sent over as replacement. So, all these young Nisei boys are in the 442 but the war is over. So, you know, a lot of them didn't see any action. But they're veterans of the 442. Some of them went to the Pacific. You know, because they transferred. But for us, the war was over.

When you reflect back on your life and your service, what do you think is one of the most important or crucial lessons that we can learn from World War II and what is the thing that you want people to remember about that time today?



Lawson and Mineko's wedding day in 1946

I think the biggest thing that's happened is communication. In 1941, we only had radio and newspapers. And that's all you heard or saw and now, instantly, you can put something in your phone and send it around the world. In seconds, you can correspond with anybody, with any subject.

When World War II ended, the United States was in a poor financial condition. The war had drained the country of almost everything. The young men that were coming back from war, all they wanted to do was get on with life. It was get married, get a house, have kids, get a job. Just go on with life. And I think for a lot of us, we all

had PTSD pretty badly. Those in the infantry. Those who actually had to do the fighting on the front line. And the military had no cure for that, no treatment. It was, "Oh you just have battle fatigue, you'll get over it." But for all of us it was mainly, those who could stand alcohol, it was drink alcohol. And drink and drink until you passed out. And when you passed

out, you forgot everything. Until you woke up then it started all over again. A lot of Nisei boys became alcoholics. I drank a lot, but I think I was able to control it. I passed out a few times you know, it was the only cure that we had for PTSD. I still have it! And it will never go away. It's in there someplace.

Yeah. I can't imagine.

Yeah. So for most of us, we need to get on with our life. The war is over, that's dead and gone. What's next? You know, the Nisei population basically had to come out of prison on the mainland. Get out of prison, 25 dollars and a ticket to wherever you wanted to go. And start all over. Not only were the soldiers coming home with nothing to start over. But their parents and siblings, all had nothing to start over. That's another big story in this area, how so many got started again.

What is the lesson that you want your grandchildren to remember about your experience?

Well in 1941, we did what we had to do. A big rumor was, "Now that we have most of the Japanese in these camps, we just load them on the ships and send them all to Japan." Well, they could have done that, there would have been no Japanese left on the soil of the United States. That was the intention of the racist people that were running the country. We overcame that. But we had to go to war to do that. And if the Nisei boys had not volunteered, there would be no Japanese living in the United States today.

You think?

You wouldn't be here. No Canon cameras, no Toyotas, no sushi bars. Nothing Japanese would have been in the United States. It's what the Nisei boys did in 1941 and '42 that saved the Japanese population from annihilation in this country. And that's what the Sansei, Yonsei, Gosei kids, have to remember what happened way, way back, that their parents probably don't even remember.

That's why your story is a powerful one to tell.

Well, I'm not sure if it means anything but, times are different now. In those days it was do or die. Today, I don't know.

Yes. And war was very different too.

I am a firm believer that the government has to be changed. We have to have very strict gun control and mainly weapons that are used in warfare should never be allowed in the public area. No one should have a gun that shoots automatic. No hunter should use a gun like that. It's bad enough to shoot human beings with a gun like that. But it's a weapon designed for war. And it shouldn't be available to anybody. Unless you're in the military. And until people in this country have the courage to stop the NRA or the government leaders who allow this to go on — they should've been stopped a year ago. Or two years ago. Keeps on going. Just that weakness is a sign of the end of the U.S. as it is.

Do you think we just sort of lost that morality?

It's very difficult. You know the country is so divided. I think eventually it's either gonna be make or break. This country is going to have to correct itself, or it's going to fall apart. And I don't know if another country will try to take over, or if it's going to be an internal revolution. It just can't go on the way it is.



Lawson in his Morgan Hill home

There is a new generation every twenty years. Perhaps I should add that the Nisei generation probably saved the Japanese population from extinction in the United States. I think the young people that have Japanese blood who are descendants of the Nisei need to remember how they got here. And if their parents haven't told them, then maybe this is the way that they'll find out. And hopefully, maybe it will increase the knowledge and perhaps help that next generation become leaders of this country, knowing what their ancestors had to go through. A very important thing.